

# California Today: A Needle Exchange Program Stirs a Fight in Orange County; California Today

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**Byline:** Jose A. Del Real and Matt Stevens

**Highlight:** Friday: Public health experts spar with political leaders, more details emerge about the shooting in Bakersfield, and the "Voice of the Clippers" says he'll retire.

## Body

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Good morning.

(Want to get California Today by email? Here's the sign-up.)

When the Orange County Needle Exchange Program opened in February 2016, it sought to fight rising H.I.V. and hepatitis C infections in the county by providing clean needles to intravenous drug users. Based in Santa Ana, the program began amid a national opioid epidemic that had resulted in a surge of heroin use.

It was organized by medical students and public health experts steeped in data about effective public health interventions.

But the program, the first and only one in Orange County, soon found itself under fire by critics and concerned community members. A swell of needle litter in public libraries and parks in Santa Ana collided with a worsening homelessness epidemic in the region, and the two issues became intertwined in the minds of the public and political leaders.

Transient individuals, critics said, were using the needles to shoot up in public and then improperly discarding them. And the syringe exchange program, they said, had facilitated their drug abuse and created the needle litter.

The fallout has pitted worried public health experts against Orange County political leaders, who have fielded large numbers of complaints and concerns from constituents.

The program's leaders and various public health experts have forcefully pushed back against the attacks but have struggled to change public opinion.

"There are a lot of misconceptions about syringe exchanges despite lots of public health evidence around this. We know that syringe exchanges have been proven time and again here in the United States and internationally to reduce the spread of diseases," said Nathan Birnbaum, member of the board of directors for the syringe exchange and a fourth-year medical student at the University of California, Irvine School of Medicine.

In December 2017, Santa Ana terminated the needle exchange's permit. As part of an effort to remain open, the exchange requested authorization from the state's Department of Public Health to operate a mobile, countywide program in four cities: Santa Ana, Anaheim, Orange and Costa Mesa. Last month, it was granted permission to operate the expanded program.

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Now Orange County leaders have escalated their battle by suing to permanently shut down the expanded syringe exchange before it begins operating again.

"You have people shooting up in the public-library restroom. You have municipal employees who are being pricked when emptying the trash," said Andrew Do, the chairman of the Orange County board of supervisors.

The first hearing on the case is set for later this month. But it is unclear if there will be an immediate or permanent resolution to the conflict.

The state health department declined to comment on the matter, but voiced support for needle exchange programs as important public health tools.

"We really understand people's concerns about syringe litter," said Dr. Karen Smith, the state's public health officer. "The challenge for us is communicating that the syringe exchange programs is one of your most potent tools for decreasing syringe litter."

California Online

(Please note: We regularly highlight articles on news sites that have limited access for nonsubscribers.)

The authorities say a domestic dispute in Bakersfield turned into mass murder, the latest killings in an economically depressed county that has the state's highest murder rate. [The New York Times]

Senator Dianne Feinstein referred information involving Judge Brett Kavanaugh to federal investigators but did not say what the matter involved. [The New York Times]

Protesters gathered at the Global Climate Action Summit. Many called on Gov. Jerry Brown to stop oil drilling in the state. [The New York Times]

In a lengthy blog post, Mark Zuckerberg said that "Facebook is better prepared" to fight election interference than it was in 2016. [The New York Times]

While his Republican opponent continues to attack him in the governor's race, Gavin Newsom remains more focused on rallying support for down-ballot Democrats. [The Sacramento Bee]

For eight months last year, BART collected some riders' license plate information and sent it to a database ICE can access. [The Mercury News]

The chief executive of the California Public Employees' Retirement System does not have a college degree. Now officials are being forced to explain why they hired her. [The Sacramento Bee]

President Barack Obama made his first appearance with candidates of the midterm election season, in Orange County. The reporter Dana Goodyear went, and she found a palpable discontent with the Trump administration. [The New Yorker]

In the early 2000s, a generation of ambitious young Latino college graduates returned to the Coachella Valley and started a movement that would shape the region's politics for decades. Now they are in charge. [The Palm Springs Desert Sun]

One of our tech reporters visited San Francisco's first completely automated cashierless store. It was trying to figure out whether she would steal a bag of popcorn. Did it succeed? [The New York Times]

Is California a good role model? Depending on how you look at it, it's one of the richest states or one of the most unequal. [New York Times Opinion]

In retracing the birth of California, a writer finds the roots of the state's modern identity — and clues about why it's become a center of resistance. [Pacific Standard]

For a great glass of pinot noir, look to the Anderson Valley. [The New York Times]

Reminder: A Special Event

An Evening With "The Daily" at the Theatre at Ace Hotel DTLA: Sept. 20

Twenty minutes a day, five days a week, "The Daily" brings transparency to how the news is reported and explores topics of the day in depth. For its first live event in Los Angeles, the host Michael Barbaro joins the national immigration reporter Caitlin Dickerson — a California native and graduate of California State University, Long Beach — to discuss her groundbreaking reporting on deportation and family separations at the border.

Buy tickets here

And Finally ...

It can be hard — very hard — to be a Clippers fan. And over the years, perhaps no one has been more loyal to the team than its legendary broadcaster, Ralph Lawler.

But as he enters his 40th season as the "Voice of the Clippers," Mr. Lawler announced this week that he plans to retire at the end of the season.

"I now realize that I have spent half of my 80 years as a part of this team. The Clippers are a big part of my life's D.N.A.," he said in a statement. "Yet, it is important that we have some 'life after basketball.'"

Mr. Lawler joined the team when it was the San Diego Clippers during the team's first year in California, in 1978. Six years later he moved with the team to Los Angeles and has since called more than 3,100 games, the team said.

He has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, three Emmys and several other awards — all tributes to his success. And the Clippers noted that he is one of few announcers who have called games in the N.F.L., M.L.B., N.H.L. and N.B.A.

The team will end its regular season against the Utah Jazz, and officials said they will honor the broadcaster by hosting "Ralph Lawler Night" that evening at Staples Center.

California Today goes live at 6 a.m. Pacific time weekdays. Tell us what you want to see: [CAtoday@nytimes.com](mailto:CAtoday@nytimes.com).

California Today is edited by Julie Bloom, who grew up in Los Angeles and graduated from U.C. Berkeley.

PHOTO: A sealed insulin needle that washed ashore near the mouth of the Santa Ana River in late 2016. (PHOTOGRAPH BY Mindy Schauer/Digital First Media, via Orange County Register, via Getty Images FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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